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ABSTRACT

Unlike commercial television, whose portrayal of older adults is often negative or degrading, cable television could offer an opportunity for more positive programming directed at older adults. Those who are interested in the portrayal of older adults and aging on television should seek control of the medium available to them, i.e., local cable programming. However, the cable industry needs to be convinced that the aging consumer should be a focal point of cable programming. Although older adults are not now large subscribers to cable television, demographically they will become a group with more impact in the future. Access to cable programming is possible both through the marketing of programs designed to attract older viewers, such as AARP (American Association of Retired Persons) programming and programs from TEMPO (Television for a Generation Ahead), and through local volunteer programming. Once cable programming for older adults is put into place, it must be marketed and advertised through newspapers, Senior Citizens Centers, and other organizations that have contact with older adults. Once a communication network is established, it becomes a powerful ally, and permits communication between older adults and those interested in providing them with quality programming. (9 references) (EW)

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COMING OF AGE ON TELEVISION

Paper presented at the 34th Annual Meeting
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AMERICAN SOCIETY ON AGING

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The use of Cable television as a medium for the dissemination of information to elders is a new and exciting activity for me. Working with a local Cable company during the past year has enabled me to appreciate the importance of television as it effects the lives of older people.

The title of the program, Coming of Age On Television, is, I confess, borrowed from Simone de Beauvoir who coined the phrase in her novel, Coming of Age. The program features services, educational opportunities, and general topics of interest to older people. I am presently redesigning the program to be offered through Southeastern Massachusetts University's Cable Network, which currently provides programming to 17 channels in Southeastern Massachusetts and Rhode Island. This brief encounter with Cable production, and my concurrent research, has led me to believe that Cable programming is a viable and successful way to combat the negative image of aging, frequently portrayed on commercial television.

It is well documented in the literature that older people are portrayed as feeble, eccentric, silly, foolish and almost always as abject failures. (Powell and Williamson, 1985). Several studies done between 1923-1981 all verify the presence of ageist bias in the portrayal of old age. In a study by Aronoff (1974), it was found that in prime network television drama, old age is associated with increasing unhappiness, failure and evil. An area of even larger concern, is the suggestion that prime network may be overtly or covertly using this ageist stereotyping, to legitimize existing paterns of dominance within the sociopolitical order. (Powell and Williamson, 1985) This, of course, relates to the market place value placed on the non-producing members of our society. If this is indeed the reality, there is no question that the elder image, as portrayed on commercial television, tends to diminish the stature of this group. Biases and stereotypical attitudes are reinforced in not only the general public but in the elders themselves. The message is insistent and persuasive. Old is ugly, ridiculous and to be avoided at all costs!

Commercial television out does itself in exploiting the normal changes of aging. One only needs to observe the number of laxative advertisements to note the level of exploitation. The frightening reality of the situation compounds when we realize that there are over 700 non-prescription drugs available for over the counter purchase. The potential for manipulation of the elder, in the area of health beliefs becomes manifest.

The realization that older people have been identified as heavy users of television emphasizes the importance of this issue, of exploitation and manipulation. If older people used television as an occasional escape from reality, as many of us do, the damage to the psyche would not be significant. This, however, is not the case. The literature points out that television serves a "companionship" function and helps in alloting the day into appropriate segments. (Davis 1971) A Nielson study done in 1976, states that women over the age of fifty (50), watch an average of five (5) hours of television per day. Everyone requires a role model for self-actualization, elders are no exception. If the message on commercial television is one of humiliation and degradation, the older person becomes traumatized and accepting of his or her substandard role in our society. Intellectually, we should expect a great outcry from the older consumer-- a concerted effort to boycott the offending program or advertisement. This does not happen, the media has done its job too well, the message is clear. You are helpless, ineffective, and your responses do not matter (Seligmian 1975).

It is ironic that although the older person is one of the largest consumers of television, he or she continues to be victimized by the medium of choice. This traumatization and devaluation leads to a passivity with the status quo, which proclaims, no power for elders. Under this framework, older people are easily subjected to advertising strategies which offer instant "cures" for non-existent pathologies. The normal physiological changes of aging are touted as curable situations, if one only buys the appropriate product. The older person has been conditioned to believe that which he hears and sees, therefore, television advertising meets this criteria, as it is a "two sense" medium.

The reality of the situation may seem grim, and it is, however, there is a light at the end of the tunnel called Cable Programming. If we are to conclude that televion serves an important role in the life of many older persons, as a surrogate social support system, we must work toward improving that system. The system must meet the needs of the consumer.

In order to bring to the elder consumer appropriate programming, certain criteria need to be examined. Studies done between 1961-1978 show that older people by and large prefer news and public affairs programming in preference to light entertainment. Older people use television as an information medium, choosing it over newspapers, books and radio (Young 1979).

It is suggested that this choice reflects the sensory losses often accompanying the aging process. Television's "two sense" approach incorporates both hearing and sight thus accommodating for these changes of aging.

Those of us active in programming need to be aware of the intensity of elder viewing and present accurate, current information based on the reality of aging issues. Cable programming must not emulate commercial television by taking advantage of a vulnerable captive audience. Unlike prime network, which must satisfy the paying advertising sponsor, Cable can work in the best interest of their paying customers, the older consumer.

I have discussed at length, the problem of commercial television and the promise of Cable programming, let us now look at the present and future of this medium.

Cable systems are growing. In 1969, there were 2,490 Cable systems in the United States. Today there are in excess of 8,000 systems. In 1982, Cable viewers totaled only one third (1/3) of the television audience. Today approximately fifty percent (50%) of all television viewers have Cable. This figure represents eighty seven million (87,000,000) television households in the United States, forty one million (41,000,000) have basic Cable contracts.

Unfortunately, too few Cable companies see the potential of the older consumer. Instead of developing appropriate programming for this unique group, they continue to utilize canned programs already established through the media network. (Gillespie 1975, Real and And son and Harrington, 1987.)

It has been suggested that Cable programming will be one of the major communication tools of the future. For most elders the future is now! We need to secure a place in Cable programming as our piece of the pie. Those of us who are interested in aging well on television, must seek control of the medium that is available to us, local Cable programming. There is an urgency to this message. In 1984, Cable television was given the red light, called the Cable Communication Policy Act. This deregulation is expected to have its biggest impact this year, 1988. I quote Mr. James Mooney, President of the National Cable Television Association. He says, "We're going to have a lot more money available to put into programming creation, Cable must provide programming sufficiently different then that of the broadcast

networks. As opportunity beckons, creative people will respond and the natural forces implicit in such a process are likely to diminish the proportionate share of the pie." How do we convince the Cable industry that the aging consumer deserves a large piece of that pie?

Unfortunately, identifying the elder as a viable market, worthy of development, will not be easy. Although elders have been identified as "heavy viewers," they continue to represent a small portion of Cable subscribers. There is also the lingering message from the commercial network devaluing the elder as a consumer.

In my research, I attempted to ferret out some possible reasons why the older person is not a large subscriber of Cable television. The following areas are offered as an introduction to a thought provoking question:

1. The Cable concept is not well understood by many older people. Personal interviews corroborated this assumption. Some older people felt that the Cable company represented a "big brother" scenario. They felt that allowing the Cable into their homes violated their privacy, that the Cable was somehow a two-way medium.

2. Fixed income limits spending. Cable was not perceived as an affordable luxury item.

3. Others were influenced by the negative publicity surrounding the licensing of Cable in the early sixties and seventies. (60's and 70's)

In 1964, the Coalition of Commercial Television and theater owners waged a bitter campaign to regulate and discourage pay television in California. Commercial television depicted pay television as, "a thief in the night--stealing the elders free television." Playing on the older persons' fear of isolation and loss of his companion, the commercial television stated that, "In your golden years of life, sitting around, abandoned by your children, at least you have "free" television as a companion. You will lose it unless you vote for our amendment to the state constitution, Proposition 15." (Thomas Whiteside, 1985)

The campaign waged was done to prevent Cable pay television from becoming an option for the public in California. Retired people were especially targeted as

they were perceived as being a potent force who might be persuaded to vote "No". The premise was correct, the vote was two-to-one (2-1) in favor of the amendment. Pay television was banned in the state of California. Once again the elder was manipulated to defeat an option that could have worked in his favor. Eventually, the propostion was overturned, but pay television experienced a severe setback both professionally and financially. It is interesting to note that Commercial television is now involved in severe cutbacks while Cable is steadily growing.

With the negative history of elders and Cable television, we can be well advised to put our best foot forward. In order for us to convince the Cable industry that we do indeed represent a growing number of potential subscribers. I offer the following statistics:

- The plus sixty-five (65) group is on the rise.
- In 1900, there were 10 old people to every 100 children.
- In 1985, there were 46 old people to every 100 children.
- In 2030, old people will exceed the population of children.

Presently, the plus sixty-five (+65) population equals 11% of the total population of the United States. By 2030, 21% of the total population will be over sixty-five (65). (A.A.R.P. 1986) The changes seen are not only in numbers, there are also demographic changes beginning to be recognized.

The new, older consumer will:

1. Be better educated
2. More informed about issues of aging
3. More assertive in their requests to be heard and served
4. More willing to form cohesive alliances
5. Be better off financially

Obviously, the older person is becoming a consumer to be reckoned with.

Access to Cable programming needs to be acquired. The approach to Cable access is two fold. First, the larger Cable Systems need to see the potential in the older consumer. A good example of this is the American Association of Retired Persons which, through their Institute of Lifetime Learning, have developed a video series that includes a technical assistance kit called How to Produce Local Cable Television Shows. The A.A.R.P. is also participating in a national computer linked

network of older persons. Another example is a corporation called T.E.M.P.O., which stands for, Television For A Generations Ahead, indeed, a provocative title. Along with featuring programs for the "45 plus" viewer, it depicts aging as part of a positive life style. It reinforces a message to the mature viewer, "This is your network. Enjoy and remember that you are ahead of others in affluence, buying power, financial assets and lifestyle." Their programs are marketed throughout the United States. This is the sort of programming that deserves our support.

The second area of programming is the volunteer role at the local level. This is where the most immediate payback can be realized, local Cable programming. All local Cable is accessible to some extent. Federal Law recognizes the rights of cities and towns to acquire channels for community television. These are part of the franchise agreements between the community and the Cable company. We need to be active and verbal in citing our needs. Openings on local advisory boards are usually to be found and local officials need to be supported in their negotiating role with the Cable companies. Volunteering is one way of assuring a voice in local programming, but my research suggests that a minimum of twenty hours per week is required to become a viable programmer.

The last area of concern is by no means the least, Marketing. Once a program is accepted by the local Cable company, marketing is a must. We cannot assume that the older consumer will find and support programming solely on the basis of title ie., Coming of Age etc. We need to involve all senior entities: Councils on Aging, Senior Centers, Elder Housing, local radio and newspapers. These entities are the reservoirs and disseminators for this information. Once a network is established, it becomes a powerful ally for your programming needs. The same mechanism used to disseminate programming can be utilized as an evaluation tool. Request feedback by designing a survey instrument that is clear and succinct. Most older people do not appreciate convoluted intricate questionnaires. Be responsive to your target population, respect their critique.

The ultimate evaluation tool is the open line mechanism. A call-in capability, allows for instant communication and gratification. Channels of communication, flowing in both directions, serve as a reaffirmation of values for all concerned. As we age, we are not as concerned with tomorrow; the here and now takes precedent. Given the choice of instant response (telephone) or writing, the use of the telephone will prevail. This has been documented in numerous studies. My own brief experience also confirms this.

Coming of Age on television is a challenge and a privilege. Let us capture the moment with dignity.

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